

Black Girl Ecologies: Manifesting Fabulations and Embodying Otherwise Possibilities of
Southern Black Femme
by

Juliet Edna Irving

Dance Program
Duke University

Date: 3/29/21
Approved: 4/15/21

Michael Kliën, Supervisor

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Andrea E. Woods Valdés

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Dance Program in the
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This thesis research presents a choreographic enquiry into ways Black Americans, specifically Black femme inhabit their bodies and their entanglements to the surrounding environment. It asks the question of how Black girls in the south navigate their social circumstances, and what inheritances—metaphysical, emotional, cultural—affect their encounters with themselves and each other. To do this the author contemplates concepts of the “undistinguished mass,” Black *flesh*, and inheritances as offered by Hortense Spillers.¹

The author introduces her embodied practice of *Groove* as a burgeoning theoretical framework for exploring self in the context of its larger positioning within society and the land. *Groove* is propositioned as a way of expanding awareness of self through movement, by paying attention to the sensory information observed and communicated within our bodies. For this purpose a working group of Black femme was formed to trace their own geographies, histories, and sense of care, through conversations and physical movement strategies, to explore aspects that mold their own *Grooves*. This research project presents an urgent attempt to reimagine creative and embodied strategies for Black femme as a practice of freedom, tenderness, and connection. Through multimedia experimentations with the practice of *Groove*, it is proposed, that Black femme move to initiate a collective imagining, and access *otherwise* ways of being.

¹ Spillers, “*Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe*.”

Dedication

For black girls to reimagine themselves and access, linger, and share who they are and all the possibilities of who they can be. For black girl fantasy. For black girl dreams. For black girl possibility.

For Edna & Artise,

For Juanita, Renita, & Shakeyma,

For Aunt Dot, Aunt Gert, & every Auntie in between,

For Ms. Jannie, Mrs. Jannie, & Ms. Vernoll, & Ms. Beverly

For Whitney.

For every black girl who has shrunken her presence and dimmed her light,

you are infinite.

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Acknowledgements

I carry with me the inheritances of my ancestors, their knowledge, and ways of moving within the world, those living and those transitioned, known and unknown.

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1. Introduction: To Love Upon Arrival

Give yourself a hug. A real one. Close your eyes and slowly inhale as you stretch your arms out as far as they can go. Feel your body lift upwards, extend your legs. Exhale. Let your arms gather the space around you as they curl inward. Wrapping your arms around yourself, releasing your head into your shoulders. Squeeze. Breathe. Take a moment to just feel it. Say “I love you” aloud. Say it again. Squeeze. Breathe. Release.

This research works to manifest extraordinary renderings of black girls to dream up the possibilities of themselves, while providing them with embodied strategies to do this work independently. I investigate, in dialogue and movement, how Black girls in the south navigate their social circumstances, and what inheritances — metaphysical, emotional, cultural — are present that affect our encounters with ourselves and each other. To do this I draw upon a variety of texts drawing connections between the “undistinguished mass,”² molecular interactions of organisms,³ and the “nowhere-ness” of otherwise worlds.⁴ I also consider Spillers’ proposal of Black *flesh* in *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe*, and the expansions of this concept offered by Alexis Johnson’s *Flesh Dance* and Jasmine Johnson’s *Wicked Flesh*.

² Spillers, *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe*.

³ Tsing, Swanson, Gan, Bubandt, Haraway, *Symbiogenesis, Sympoiesis, and Art Science Activisms*.

⁴ Carter, *Otherwise Worlds: Nowhere*.

This research is indicative of my own need as an artist to intertwine my concerns for Black and brown life, the environment, and my curiosity of the universe, and how I am embedded within it. I construct otherwise realms from the many realities we each live and share with each other through my own situatedness in society as a Black, queer femme that is relentlessly trying to limit how I dream and what I manifest of my dreams. I am drawn to exploring facets of my identities in any environment, found and self-constructed, to make sense of my own narrative and continue pushing what I and others perceive as possible. I engage the potential possibilities that come from the dynamic intersections and encounters of these identities in the space.

As an artist who designs experiences that use immersion and community as modes of connection and empathy, I am being mindful and intentional about how the installations I dream up will be choreographed in such a way that prioritize health and safety while maintaining the integrity of the work. My experience as a choreographer has always been driven by a core belief that anyone can dance and that everyone has magical movement inside them. Growing up dance was about actively instilling confidence and trust in yourself at the studio I attended and taught at. The same is true for how dance functioned as expression at my home, with my dad's never-ending love of dance and music and his pushy yet inviting approach to get everyone on his joyful energy. At school and the "black parties" dance felt like the only solid ground we could

stand on. It was as if dance was the only thing supporting the weight of all that we are, were, and had the potential to be, giving us opportunity to love ourselves.

Choreographing and collaborating with people with a range of experience in dance and the arts helped me realize that I was constantly trying to create containers, whether through installations or guided improvisations, that allowed people the space to explore themselves within a situation. Knowing that each person was bringing their spirit, experiences, and ways of inhabiting their body into the work and having conversations around that generated trust and honesty between us. I wanted to validate the experiences, sensations, memories, and dreams of my collaborators, especially the dancers, and empower how they embody their sense of self and intuition. I enjoy the process of initiating that investigation in others and being alongside them as we develop the work.

My desire is to help people trust their intuition through embodied methods because it leads them to trusting their own choices and themselves while affirming, reinforcing, and negotiating how they relate the 'self' to their body. I approach the arts, visual and performance, not as separate mediums from each other but as part of my toolbox of possibility I have gathered for myself. My creative process is intricately linked with where I come from, imagining possibilities from what I already have to create with and re-envisioning what something can be or offer to the process. A now-reclaimed phrase, "nigga-riggin" is an artefact of chattel slavery and one of my inheritances that

describes poor Black folks using what they have to create what they need, typically out of scraps and discarded materials to expand the possibilities offered to them. It is a call to think outside of the box, to always be reimagining a 'something else' beyond what is already established to be something.

I value deep observation, taking notice of things often overlooked to ask 'what else' or 'what could be' from using them as source material. I enter works by allowing space for choice-making from other dancers or collaborators, and as we by continuing to make of elements. Gathering a bunch of things into a space and seeing how they fall together, worldbuilding is a way to satisfy my own desire for highly stimulating environments and have enough moving elements that their intersections in the work are unpredictable and new to myself. In my work, I collage mediums like choreography, moving graphics, and found materials into living assemblages that generate their own temporal realities. Validating the experiences of Black femme, I value creating work that dreams alongside us and offers different realities to audiences. My work generates experiences that shift perceptions where someone's normal mode of inhabitation and ways of being are challenged.

The process of this practice based thesis-research continuously threw me back upon the question of 'expertise' and elitism in academia. That is until I reached the answer, that I too, am an expert. I assert expertise because I am a Black, femme, queer Southerner who grew up in the rural depths of South Carolina writing about Black,

femme southern existence. To reclaim and affirm our ways of producing knowledge and the transmission of this knowledge is part of the work of this research, therefore, I will enact it in this thesis. I make speculative and declarative statements attempting to frame the communal perspectives, that are being cultivated, yet even in the labor of the endeavor am reminded of the impossibility of defining something so undefinable.

2. Undistinguished Mass: Embodying Afro-pessimism in South Carolina

2.1 *I Was Born Backed Into a Corner*

I invite you to find a corner of a wall for an embodied exercise and as you move towards it, noticing what is your focus and what is in your periphery, just on the edges of your vision, hearing, smell, etc. I encourage you to try this facing both toward and away from the wall. Slowly but purposefully pressing yourself into the corner, feel where you connect with the wall, the pressure against your skin, the conflicting sensations of enclosure and exposure. The way you must hold yourself, the tension. What is your breathing like? Take notice. Slowly shift between pressing between against the wall and ever so slightly moving away from it. Feel the release and tension of your body, the air that fills the space around you. Take notice. Begin incrementally moving your body away from the wall. Take notice.

“It’s like we’re born backed into a corner, and you spend your life fighting to gain and hold just the tiniest bit of space so that the ones after you can have that space and fight to gain a little more.” In a conversation with my mother she likened our existence as Black women to this which I connected with on a deep and visceral level recognizing immediately that this was the *cornerstone* of my research. In this metaphor, the relationship you have to the corner and the thick, heavy space around you is dependent on your positionality. The surrounding space is constantly pushing against

your skin molding you, suffocating you, trying to infiltrate your pores. It shrinks you. Being born in the corner facing the wall, or born in the corner with your back to the wall, affects what you are able to perceive as possibility and the kinds of models of possibilities you seek.

Southern culture, especially with its embeddedness in Christianity, is steeped in rigid social hierarchies where Black girls are deliberately situated at the bottom of those hierarchal structures, an artefact of Transatlantic chattel slavery's dehumanization of Black women and the continued dehumanization that followed.⁵ These hierarchies uphold themselves in states like South Carolina by emphasizing and ingraining deference in any given situation to the power that negates self-permissioning as a viable, trustworthy mode of being. Exposure to, or of, the *otherwise* beyond what these structures, and the people constructing them, allow is limited, and when present, is ridiculed, dismissed, and shunned.⁶ The act of permissioning the self is one that generates friction against the internalized racism, homophobia, ableism, classism, and sexism that causes a Black girl to often be left asking or waiting for permission to engage with the world in a specific way. There is a hesitancy, a questioning present at all times that brings a specific tension to the concept of the "Carefree Black girl." The truths of our

⁵ Byars, *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*.

⁶ Carter, *Otherwise Worlds: Nowhere*.

existences are always at war with the reading of our marks. A Black girl's existence is a practice in contradiction.

2.2 Survival Not Thrival

The history of South Carolina is unique in its' origins as a slave colony since its inception; a place where enslaved Black lives outnumbered those that claimed ownership over them and whose identity is defined against those "outside" of South Carolina.⁷ Presently, a culture of extreme conformity is dominant, especially in the rural areas where many Black families have resided in all of their known history, that reflects the concept of *southern assumptions*. The authors who coined the term theorize that, "racism is inherent or related to individual preference, to place and time, with a construct we term *southern assumptions*. Southern assumptions are the mechanisms in which participants connect collective historical racism in the south to the race problems of today."⁸

In communities where fear and caution are ingrained so deeply, to be different or expressive in your otherwise-ness is to threaten others with the possible consequences. The overall mode of thought seems to be that you express and live in the otherwise at the sacrifice of the community's wellbeing, therefore to keep the community "safe" - when there is clearly and evidently no such thing in Black life - is to conform, not to

⁸ Walker-Devose, *Southern Assumptions*, 355.

disrupt. The fear of making the livelihoods of the community worse than many already feel themselves to be in is enough for Black folks to police themselves in behavior and expression, readily taking on the values and beliefs of the white Southerners around them. Most forms of self-expression have little value especially coming from the Black community, an artefact of the state's centrality in Transatlantic chattel slavery. The urgent proposition of my research is, that these Black rural communities have inherited, and indeed embodied, the belief that their expression has no value, and certain formations of expressions and identities.

The dominant white southern epistemology has no use for truth. Their epistemologies are dependent upon the interplay of fabrication and delusion of supremacy, which in turn is dependent upon everyone involved in the delusion playing their role in its fabrication – knowingly and unknowingly. These communities have internalized the notion that they are an undistinguished mass unable to be separated from their own conditions and circumstances. I propose that Black, southern culture is rooted in the rhetoric of Afro-pessimism without the explicit language to name it as such creating a cycle of negativity towards the prospect of Black ability for success. The dominant epistemology seems to revolve around an acceptance of what *is*, and has little value for what *if*; communities that are undisturbed in the ways these areas are have little to no variability in their values over time, which stifles major shifts in the collective imagination. Lack of mobility and proximity to otherwise expressions, such as artistic

spaces, public events, and diverse gatherings, the discouragement towards aesthetic difference in identity expression, and even the poor internet access that comes from living rurally, maintain this communal thought process. When the overwhelming denial of personal expression and experience, and the witnessing of such denial happens constantly to those around you, you learn that your expressions are worthless, and you cease to spend to energy attempting to express your subjective experiences and sensibilities.

In these areas everything exists in binaries. There is no allowance for in-between or liminal space. Especially in regards to race and culture. They are not only placed in direct opposition to each other, both black and white kids are conditioned in this environment to only be able to define themselves and their communities against what the other “is not.” Blackness and whiteness are measured and bound containers with fluctuating standards. Self-segregation was more common than cross-racial socialization in my hometown’s school system, though socializing outside of school cross-racially became more frequent with the exception of the all-Black parties – the only times I would witness others and myself experience a sense a freedom. This is not to say we did not have friends or associates in either group, but there was a collective understanding that “if you never breach my world, I will never breach yours;” and there is a tangible fear present when that is the result of decades of racial violence and fear-mongering, compounding the already heightened suspicion, paranoia, and all-around hesitancy to

boldly express any “otherwise-ness.” There is a social contract I believe one enters when born and raised in a racially-charged environment such as this that is the backbone of its society and that imagined, constructed line is the unspoken law.

2.3 Ecological Annihilation

The film *Annihilation* inspired the research early in the process conceptually and aesthetically with the climactic scene where the main character faces the unknown entity that changes or annihilates the world around it. There were several references made by the creators in an interview that prompted me to imagine Blackness and the landscape (more broadly humans and our environment) as a form of interchanging, shifting annihilation. The Shimmer is an amorphous alien entity, that upon arrival in an Earth forest sparks a process with every living organism that encounters it. The Shimmer inhabits the space acting as a container for the mutation, separation, and assimilation of organisms into reflections and refractions of each other.⁹ We witness the dynamics of ecological assemblages, as introduced by Haraway, as they are becoming and unbecoming all at once into an undistinguished mass. In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Haraway explores the interrelations of critters as... attracted towards each other, intervening with, and unfolding the mechanisms of how ecological assemblages are formed. This is through the curious act of 'critters' habits to ingest, digest, and assimilate

⁹ Eisenberg, “Annihilation Ending: What Happens, And What We Think It Means.”

each other as if they are compelled to do so. The implication is that the impulses of the near-invisible critters Haraway references are driving forces for every moving or living organism (and the cells that compose it). Annihilation is defined as “complete destruction or obliteration,” or in physics, “the conversion of matter into energy, especially the mutual conversion of a particle and an antiparticle into electromagnetic radiation.”¹⁰ In many ways we are converting and moving between the antiparticle and particle relationship with our very existence. The resulting energy is life. Is vibration. Is dance. The negotiation of my atom’s particles and their antiparticles is what moves me. When examined through this lens, we begin to see how the self and landscape relationship is much more expansive than what we choose to operate within. I use the term “bits” to describe the ‘scientific’ bits (cells, molecules, atoms) of self, the experiences of self in the body, and the pasts and possible futures constructing the self.

There is an exploration of the impulse towards self-destruction that echoes our current reality where we separate ourselves from ‘nature’ as we annihilate it, causing the destruction of ourselves because we are nature. In the film, all living organisms were affected by the presence of others transmitting their bits and uncontrollably entangling their DNA and phenomenology because of The Shimmer. The Shimmer is originally assumed to be a hostile alien entity that destroys through consumption, however its’ a

¹⁰ *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, “annihilation”

container that reflects and refracts what is happening inside of it. The particles and antiparticles in their encounters are constantly exchanging matter and energy. I connect the film with the concept of 'ecological assemblages' where creatures digest and ingest each other suggested by Haraway¹¹ in relation to the undistinguished mass of Black flesh mentioned by Spillers.¹² I further contextualize the Black, rural epistemology this research was borne of in Appendix B which includes links to writings that contain personal accounts of cross-racial relations in the community.

¹¹ Tsing, Swanson, Gan, Bubandt, Haraway, *Symbiogenesis, Sympoiesis, and Art Science Activisms*.

¹² Spillers, *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*.

3. Groove as Ecological Manifestation: Activating Realms of Otherwise Possibility

3.1 Something to do with Flesh: A Reading of Hieroglyphs

Throughout the process, I wondered at the possibilities of seeing ourselves within and beyond the intersections of Black Americanhood. For many Black American communities generational silence, lack of documentation, and cultural gaps in generational values contribute to the disconnection we have from our history, our truth. It is a devastating experience to be Black in America with only America as the model for cultural and social practices; or Black-Black as we would call it as kids. Another reason Black art and expression are so urgently needed as visible and accessible otherwise in these types of areas. Not to suggest that this is only applicable South Carolina, rather that because of its history, structures, and demographics the Black girl that grows up in this state carries a distinct set of inheritances to navigate.

In communities that are highly racialized, they are oriented to see themselves predominantly through a white, Southern-American lens with a steadfast refusal to acknowledge practices and values. You begin defining yourself and your history only by determining what you are not; categorizing and these South Carolinian communities reflect that polarization. This compounded with the lack of agency Black folks have restricts us from even considering certain inhabitations. To be “safe,” we must contort ourselves. These are circumstances and conditions that need to be confronted if we are

to move collectively away from anti-Blackness and internalized hatred toward tenderness. Johnson writes,”

A physical and discursive violence sundered black bodies into maimed flesh. Slavery depended on objectifying the black enslaved; as such, black women became subject to slavery’s uses for (rendered as “markings” on) them. These “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” Spillers writes, “come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. These “hieroglyphics,” although understood by black women themselves as markings, go (mis)recognized by others as authentic. Thus, the black female body is “marked up” — signified on — while black womanhood evades a broader public optic. What we “see” or come to know in looking at a black woman is rarely a black woman’s “truer word.”¹³

This reading of the hieroglyphics of the flesh is in conversation with Crawley’s reading of the flesh and its capacity for vibration and otherwise possibility. He argues that we “must abolish the very conceptual frame that produces categorical distinction and makes them desirable; we have to abolish the modality of thought that *thinks* categorical distinction as maintainable.”¹⁴

¹³ Johnson, J. *Flesh Dance*.

¹⁴ King, *Otherwise Worlds: Beyond Incommensurability*

What do Black daughters inherit and how are these inheritances shaping their ecologies? How can we envision Black girls' grooving amongst, within, and alongside their landscape? What factors are influencing how Blackness and Black womanhood interact with the landscape? What are the encounters between Black femme entangled with? What does it look like for black girls to create otherwise existences and how does that manifest, move, and thrive? How does the manifestation of a black girl's otherwise possibilities move the world around them? What is needed for black girls to create and exist in self-determined worlds and states?

3.2 Tender Sites

Tender sites are the physiological scars, marks, or injuries that are caused by violence and trauma affecting how we inhabit and engage with our physical body and senses. As a group we worked from our tender sites, places of heaviness, and moved through them to manifest a fuller self out of that. We unpacked, in personal and shared sessions, our aches and shames and negativity then using the movement technologies of *Groove* to release as much of that as we could. I wanted to be intentional in our time together about ensuring that we don't shy away from the uncomfortable or fall back into patterns of ignoring our pain, we embraced and acknowledged all of it as part of ourselves. making sure that we didn't like run away from the things that were uncomfortable with, like, embrace that as a bit and allow you to move through as a part of not like a negative thing, but as just as a part of.

We spent many rehearsals together considering our tender sites and relating to them through the use of balloons. The balloons created a field of space that was designated to this literal, or felt, spot of our bodies and by attaching moving with them we gained a different perspective of the potential of these tender sites. This is an exercise that I imagine will grow into a healing practice because we are identifying these sites (as they make themselves known or as we are willing to share) and showing them tenderness and love. We are giving full-bodied attention to that site's histories, sensations, connections within other parts of the body in order to be alongside the trauma and tension it holds and *Groove* it into a space of release and opening, moving away from holding onto it within our body to exposing it to entanglements in the environment, giving it the necessary space to breathe and heal.

The phrases that we developed became the loose choreography for the last section of the performance when we dance the same movement. In a circle, resembling that of a conjuring, we dance each phrase together though it progresses from the beginning from an individual free *Groove*. I wanted this event to serve us as Black women first, so the space was always created as an open one that has room for laughter, talking, messing around, taking our time to arrive sharing in the totality of our humanity together.

3.3 Embedding Ecologies

The intention of the research is to investigate the relationship that a black woman has to her environment and herself, how those dynamics are then affecting how black women interact with each other, and what those encounters look like. This caused me to ask how a black woman embodies her truth and how the complex and rich narrative within her becomes a place of tenderness she can explore and wander through? Is it an internal and/or external space where a black woman can have this opportunity to define for herself what her "self" is and what that looks, feels, and *Grooves* like? How does a Black femme embrace the possibility of her embodiment when the resistance she normally confronts in the world is lessened? *Is there a way for Black femme to exist in a realm I create without engaging in the act of resistance of what their marks signify to others?*

The environment, for me as an artist and living being, and is always a model for existing in the world. With this research, I found methods that move us away from always being in relation to or in proximity of humanity but never being considered human yourself. We moved towards embracing the unhuman, using the trees and forest ecosystem as a model of entanglements, and how reflective they are, how they parallel the black woman's experience, and how we can all just exist together and exist in our truths together. "There is something I think very powerful about being able to dance and like move with all this stuff that is, like, uncomfortable, like you purposely made uncomfortable like, I was like, don't touch your trees, because I like you know, didn't

want to, but there's something about like, being able to dance and move through that like discomfort that gets you to get to somewhere that feels good," a participant commented on Sunday's *Groove*. We are moving ourselves beyond a frame of resistance, instead noticing all the activity and sensations of the entanglements between bugs, earth, animals, and yourself. These things are all grooving and this tree is existing simply as the tree it is, so finding how we could exist simply as ourselves.

3.4 Embodying Otherwise by Embracing the Self(ves)

The language of *otherwise* is offered to us by Ashon T. Crawley as a space that functions somewhere between nowhere and somewhere,¹⁵ where I theorize *Groove* makes its home. *Groove* situates itself amongst the narratives of Black femme as an embodied process connecting us to geography, lineage, and tenderness, as an act of radical healing. My research into *Groove* meets at the intersection of African & African American studies, gender and women's studies, Indigenous studies, critical race theory and ecology. It is an emerging framework, embodied practice, and state of being that generates possibility. It roots itself in elements of the aesthetics of Black dance, Afrofuturism, and Afro-pessimism simultaneously. *Groove* is a way of reconnecting us to our history (known and unknown), each other, and ourselves and to untether ourselves from hatred.

¹⁵ Crawley, Ashon T., *Blackpentecostal Breath: the Aesthetics of Possibility*

Groove in its intentional exploration provides us otherwise space necessary to uncover aspects of ourselves denied to us. We *Groove* as a practice of freedom, precisely as an assertion of the self and demonstration of agency. As a pedagogical tool, *Groove* proposes a practice of listening and rest, act of tenderness, and fluid being. *Groove* breaks constructed boundaries and delineations of “self” as being separate from its surroundings. I intend to *Groove* Afrofuturist speculation into the stagnation of these histories and their Afro-pessimist containers. What does it mean to move from a place of rest? Of ease? *Groove* is self-acceptance, a release from shame and critical judgement.

Groove defies time as it is entangled in many temporal realities, sensations, and consciences; Blackness. I *Groove* as a practice to understand and uncover my own entanglements with how I define myself and the circumstances around that inhabitation by moving, dancing, and imagining daily. I use the circumstances specific to southern Black femme as a lens to defining the what, how, and why of *Groove*, centering this marginalized perspective as the foundation for the burgeoning theory.

A person’s *Groove* evolves, and is constantly evolving, from geographies – their surrounding environment, the landscape’s place and history; lineage – the personal experiences and ancestral histories of someone along with the potential of their otherwise selves; and tenderness—sites that are sensitive to pain, expressions of

affection and gentleness, and the quality of being easy to cut or consume.¹⁶ The explorations of *Groove* investigate each of these aspects and how they intertwine with each other to create a southern Black girl's ecology — a mental topography formed of our epistemologies and phenomenological experiences. When consciously accessed through dance, *Groove* reveals otherwise possibilities by transcending finite realities and bringing the past, present, future, sensation, narrative, and experience to the forefront of our collective being. I propose, that this is something all organisms can, and do, inhabit but for black women grooving could be a space where we learn, explore, and practice care towards ourselves and each other; a place of shared embodiment to process individual and collective experiences.

3.5 Grooving Nowhere: Waterwaves, Soundwaves, & the Ether

“Nowhere bespeaks “a strange dream, a strange reverie,” ... “a strange beach” that “if you let in the excess emotion you will recall the Atlantic Ocean breaking on our heads” down here ... in the hold ... nowhere ... before and beyond and at the end of this world. Astrophysically, quantum physically, perhaps metaphysically but in the end simply and ultimately

¹⁶ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, “tenderness”

physically or materially nowhere potentiates as an alternative imagination of matter everywhere.”¹⁷

The ocean, water, and floating have been repeated motifs throughout the process of grooving with other people. In one *Groove* session, a participant noted that she felt as if the “sound was waves I [she] floated on.” Another participant mentioned the term “ether” and in the conversation that followed we concluded that the ether is the place, space, and feeling that we are trying to reach with *Groove*. I use ether to represent this otherwise space in-between that is *nowhere* and everywhere, internal and external, pasts and futures that grooving moves us into. It is the place when you “let go” that you go to, that is infinite and celestial, yet not a void or vacuum like outer space. One technical definition of ether is “a very rarefied and highly elastic substance formerly believed to permeate all space, including the interstices between the particles of matter, and to be the medium whose vibrations constituted light and other electromagnetic radiation.”¹⁸

Treating sounds as their own tracks creating polyrhythms that you can transition and shift your awareness between, as well as treating the sounds as air waves that you can inhale and let settle into your body. Within the group, we played with the sounds as airwaves, air we inhaled as soundwaves, and the resulting sensation was that of water waves. I discovered with my own *Groove* the inclination with music is to treat the lyrics

¹⁷ Carter, *Otherwise Worlds: Nowhere*.

¹⁸ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, “ether”

and voice of the singer – inflection, meaning, all of the instrumentation – as bits, each their own track interacting with each other. And I am interacting with each of them in some way as well through a tender site or somewhere else in my body, I am always in active entanglement with these sounds as they are entangled with my senses. The use of imagery such as this led to an investigation of the senses as forces of energy that we can perceive and pick apart and blend in otherwise manners.

4. I Am. We Are. : Outward Facing Action*

4.1 Relevant Artists & Precedence

Camille A. Brown: *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play*

“What does it look like to see your story reflected in a body not your own, to see a Black girl’s story through her gaze not the gaze of the media?” is a question Brown poses in connection to this work in a TEDx Talk.¹⁹ Her ability to craft such an intimate atmosphere in public spaces speaks to a deep awareness of space and focus. Engaging the attention of the audience with direct focus lines of curated, detailed visual material (the performers costumes, musicians, chalkboard). In talks about the work she states an intention to show her own humanity, and through that showing Black girl’s humanity, play, expressiveness, and liveliness asking the question: What does it mean for a Black girl to take back her story?²⁰

Solange & Collaborators

A polymathic artist is one that looks to several modes of expression to adequately manifest their ideas; Solange embodies this title as an artist who blends music, choreography, and visual art for site-specific performances.²¹ In their most recent works, Black dancers are repeatedly the driving force that provides the spectacle of

*Links to documentation of the work can be found in Appendix B

¹⁹ *Black Girl Linguistic Play* / Camille A. Brown / TEDxBeaconStreetSalon, YouTube

²⁰ *Black Girl Linguistic Play* / Camille A. Brown / TEDxBeaconStreetSalon, YouTube

²¹ Mathis, “Solange, the Polymathic Cultural Force.”

performance forming into various bodily structures or being the juxtaposed moving visuals on a static sculpture also created by Solange. The centralization of the Black body and its lived experiences is only heightened when introduced to “high-art” spaces like museums and galleries, which have historically been less interested multi-perspectives on Blackness and Black womanhood. “She released herself, and her talents, from the constraints of category... In doing so, she radically reframed herself, her music, and representations of African American womanhood. She understands Black music and Black experience as art in its own right, venue notwithstanding.”²²

Urban Bush Women: *Hair & Other Stories*

In this work, there is an emphasis on the relationships built, along with the knowledge produced and transmitted across generations of Black women through their experiences relating to their bodies, specifically their hair. This parallels with my research in its urgency to consider time within the threads it weaves of Black girl narratives. It is a call to action for healing. There is an invitation to Black girl vulnerability and a demystification of Black girls’ expression of emotions that validates it in its rightful humanity. I am interested in how she engaged the audience and choreographed the encounter with storytelling, dialogue, and movement allowing for

²² Mathis, “Solange, the Polymathic Cultural Force.”

audience participation to provoke empathy, introspection, and critique without an overbearing presence of judgment.

Nick Cave: *Soundsuits*

For Nick Cave, the body is the site where his art practices converge, and performance is where those practices and investigations activate. Movement and sound generated by the movement of the 'Sound' suits works with the visual feast each piece offers as the possibilities of how they interact and moves through space is directed by the form. The way he engages each of the senses creates a quirky play of materiality and finds conceptual and formal references in various African cultures' ceremonial rituals, masks, and celebration of sound and movement. Improvisation, spontaneity, and spectacle are all a part of the performances. How is the movement dictated by or dictating the performance object that is the costume? Nick Cave executes the extension of self through the Soundsuits reaching into the unknown and rendering an Afrofuture through these performance objects.

4.2 The Presence of Absence

An aspect of the methodology was to examine the histories of my ancestors through oral retellings and interviews, textual documentation, and artifacts to trace the connections of my own lineages bringing them into the conversation. I acknowledged some of my inheritances in a developing poetry series, "Bruised Peaches and Sugar Secrets" included in Appendix B. This created a need for me to physically and

sensatorially surround myself in representations of my inheritances as a form of undistinguished mass that submerges me inside of those realities; *A Black Daughter's Inheritance* in Appendix B. Another aspect of the research involved creating speculative visual renderings of my *Groove* and other Black, southern femme *Grooves* in order to establish my own Afrofuturist aesthetic from layering film, sound, and imagery of the Southernscape.

The thesis action involves a series of outdoor excursions that reflect the exchange suggested by Annihilation and Haraway and expand upon the circuitry created throughout each experimentation and manifestation of possible southern, Black girl ecologies. I worked with fellow cohort members to establish a working group of Black femme in order to facilitate speculation sessions, *Groove* experimentations, and adventures into the landscape. The series opens with an introductory talk and brief guided listening experience led by myself where I expand on the process behind the research and its purpose. It was important to me that this presentation of the work feel honest in its and is bringing the audience into the work from an unusual angle. Viewers were invited into my creative process, and arguably me, at my most tender throughout this research as I shared my logic around the work. I wanted to ensure that everyone who views the work whether in person or virtual, experienced the *Groove* realms as a participant and not just a viewer. Leading them through the listening practice that we did regularly as a group grounded us all into a shared mental topography that we were

each mapped individually onto but could engage with each other. Through listening we practice empathy, patience, and tenderness, engaging with a form of hyper-empathy in the world.

The weekend functioned more as a performative intensive, rather than solely performance or workshop, that the audience was *allowed* into glimpses of this world through the invitation to stream. It allowed us to settle into ourselves as we shifted into this state generating these *Grooves* and energy that remained entangled with the environment long after we physically left. The daytime *Grooves* focused on generating and activating the state within yourself and relating to the environment, while the nighttime performance is a collective, dreamed ecology that entangles all our bits into a *something else*.

The *Grooves* that felt the most “different” for me were on Saturday, both the 7AM and nighttime *Groove*, and the 7AM *Groove* felt so drastically different just in how aware my mind could even be at that time. There was a shaky sense of, “Am I still sleeping? Am I awake and really feeling whatever I’m feeling in my body?” The loopy half-awake state achieved for us in the mind what I wanted the *Groove* realm at night to do for us and the audience; making us question our state of reality and what we are perceiving. In the collective experience of the Saturday night performance it is more about how am I connecting with the people around me, and how and what are we moving towards?

The “goal” of the practice would be to always be re-enmeshing, embedding, and connecting yourself to the elements of your perceived existence. Grooving challenges our presumptions of how we are “supposed” to inhabit and engage with space.

5. Conclusion: A Practice in Freedom, a Practice in Entanglement

Our story meets two existences in a process of unbecoming human. They are transitioning from having a home within skin, bones, muscles, brains, and nerves into existing as fields of swirling bits. Bits of aliveness, of desire, of pleasure, of joy, of sorrow, of experience, of memory, of others they have moved alongside. They are unbounded and unframed, infinite and interconnected. Their core bits swirl tightly and are their souls and spirits. Peripheral bits orbit the core but further away, intermingling and exchanging freely with others' bits in radically right relationship. They are always in motion - vibrating, swirling, dancing - disintegrating their fixed bodily frames so that it can be soaked back into the lining of the universe.

– “Unbecoming” excerpt written by Courtney Crumpler and Juliet Irving

This research employed *Groove* as a developing embodied strategy to engage with ourselves, as individuals and community, and our environment outside of the markings of being Black women. Due to its' orientation, this methodology considers the traumas, violence, and restrictions of Black womanhood without situating them as the foundation and endgame of our existence. Through movement explorations and conversations with a group of Black femme dancers we gathered in a dynamic, encouraging, and speculative space of otherwise generation that prompts us to be our fullest selves in our encounters. Grooving through our tender sites we ground ourselves together in a space of empathy and care, and practice freedom. Practices in freedom for

Black women and girls are evidenced through “legal and extralegal strategy, woman-loving kinships, black femme geographies, and embodied pleasure.”²³

I experiment with my personal *Groove* and the relationship I form with the landscape; and working with southern, Black daughters to explore grooving and their ecologies. We worked with multimedia forms such as video, poetry, prose, and performance that intertwine with each other much like southern Black girl narratives do to experiment with what a collective reimagining can engender. I designed digital and analog worlds, or *Groove* realms, from the *Grooves* of myself and other Black femme asserting these *Grooves* in various public and private spaces. The research action presented a matrix of multimedia experiments and immersive experiences in movement and sound that ignite the sensations of ancestry, land, and self; works will unfold, weave, and tether with each other exploring *Groove* as a lens and practice.

A limitation of the research action was the initial practice relying more on proximity and presence, an improbability with the pandemic. Further limitations will be elaborated on in the future. In conclusion, I could argue that the progressions of this research and my own mode of thinking and artmaking is evidence of the main argument and the urgency in collective reimagining. As a scholar and human-being, I initially struggled to consider Blackness outside of its relationship to whiteness (white

²³ Johnson, “*Wicked Flesh*.”

supremacy), which is reflective of the epistemologies of my home community.

This research process shifted the focus of myself as well those I collaborate with, from our roots in Afro-pessimism to the possibilities of dance, Black art, and Afrofuturism creating opportunity for conscious embracement of a collective imagination.

Otherwise became a place of truth, and a place that is of the future. It's all possibility; a constant re-figuring, recycling, rejuvenating, restructuring of itself, and that is what we are doing all the time too. We exist alongside all of these possibilities and it suggests that they exist in a cyclical exchange rather than something we have to constantly be pivoting away from. So I wanted the space and what we're doing to both, kind of be in line with each other, but to also interact with each other in a way that is pushing us towards more of our otherwise or more of what could be possible for me in this space right now. We should not be moving away from entanglements but towards them, finding ourselves entangled and in relationship with many things on many levels. Grooving embeds us.

Freedom, within this research, does not mean free from entanglements; it in fact is the ability to recognize and navigate entanglements, to surround yourself with all of your connections sensory, ancestrally, biologically, etc. that you are bound up within. The concept of freedom took shape in the word "self-permissioning," as this research progressed. This is something as black women that is very hard to know for yourself, difficult to find modeled, and even more difficult to inhabit. The difficulty is in allowing

yourself to trust your own intuitive and kinetic knowledge, as that is something culturally in America that is disparaged. This means we are forced to pivot, never at a standstill but never moving *beyond*, so I question how can a practice of freedom be something that does not require us to pivot?

Groove is the naming of a thing that black folks are already doing but that I want us to do more of and bring into the forefront of our existence, allowing ourselves to linger and settle in it. As this work *Grooves* into the future I will bring texts like *Black Faces*, *White Spaces* into the conversation, that keep giving me different perspectives on blackness and the environment. Within the feedback I received from the advisory committee was the imagery that I am attempting to peel away some of the husk of those ways of being in the rural areas I bring to the forefront of the research. And that when that husk is being peeled the new skin or site is raw, tender, in need of healing that grooving and the tenderness it offers. The “performance” will continue in the form of an evolving series of collaborations taking place in various sites in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia. I will continue experimenting with forms and materials as I create environmental performance works that weave themselves into the fabric of the landscape. I plan to work with a photo/cinematographer from my hometown as we appear in different locations to document our explorations; each site will be its’ own unique realm with mediums and materials specific to its reimagination. I intend to work with dancers, “non-dancers,” vocalists, musicians, artists, and children throughout the

community as the series occurs. Soundscapes are currently in development building from "Mourning Train" as audio from conversations, rehearsals, and recordings are added, along with creating digital moving visuals to be incorporated. I will also continue experimentation with the body painting I explored earlier in the *Annihilation* work, expanding on the implications of the marks and hieroglyphs of the flesh in relation to the presence of absence within us and the environment. The work is life-work for myself as an artist, and though I envision creating many of these forms in the next year the concepts driving the work, the urgency, and the materials and people gathered will continue activating my imagination and the imaginations of those who encounter it.

Glossary

Ecology – considered as a combination of epistemology, phenomenological experiences, histories, and geographies of an individual or group; an internal and external environment

Groove – embodied state of otherwise possibility comprised of relationship to self, environment, and others

Ether – a very rarefied and highly elastic substance formerly believed to permeate all space, including the interstices between the particles of matter, and to be the medium whose vibrations constituted light and other electromagnetic radiation

Unbecoming – not according with the standards appropriate to one's position or condition of life

Appendix A

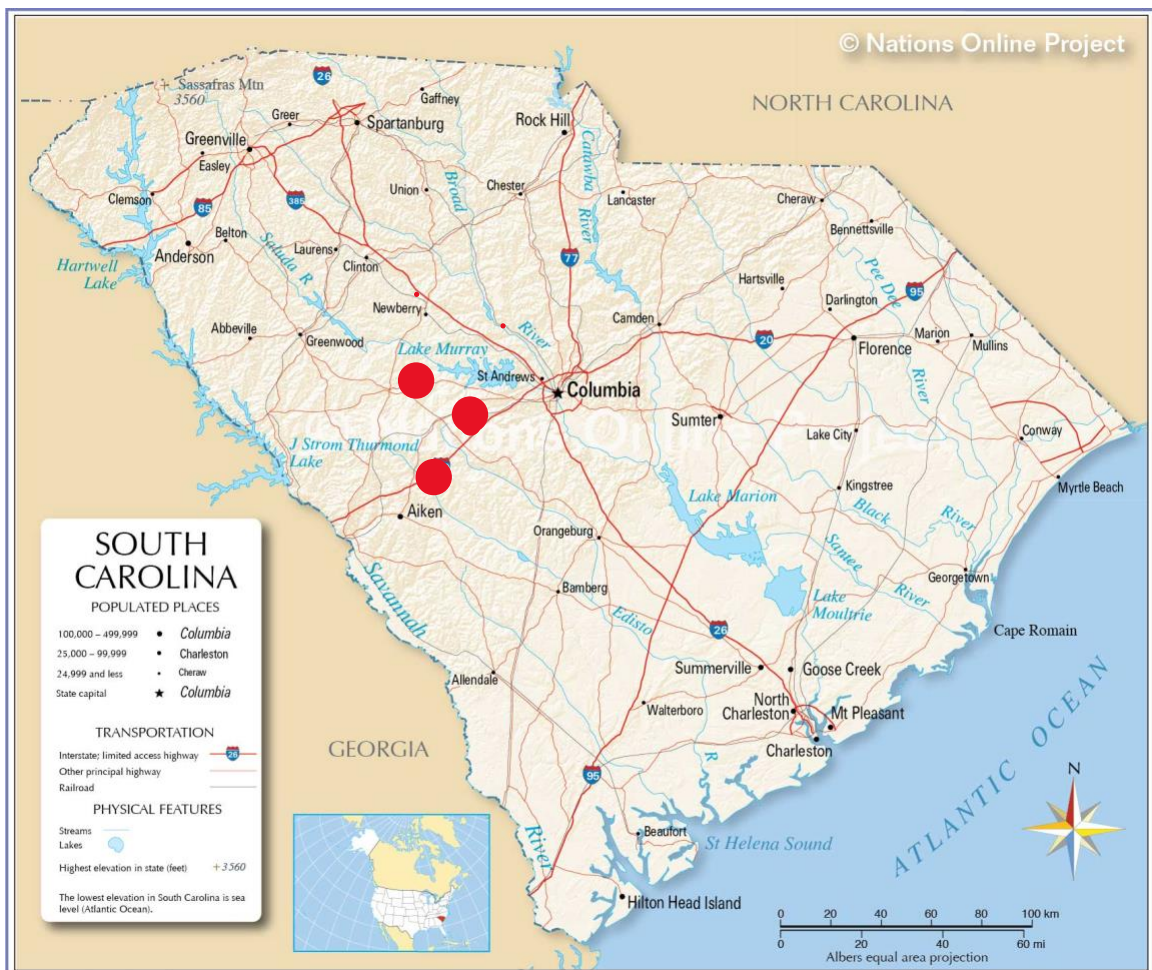
South Carolina State Map:

Red dots indicate where the communities I reference in research reside

Aiken County – New Ellenton

Saluda County – Saluda, Monetta, Ridge Spring

Lexington County – Batesburg-Leesville



Appendix B

Thesis Action Documentation: <https://www.julietirving.com>

Relevant Artist Works:

Chronicles of a Good Black Girl (unedited) – a personal retelling of the artist’s childhood experiences with white authority and Black girl resistance in the school setting

Patterns (unedited) – a wondering upon the patterns that sustain the power dynamics in the rural, South Carolina town that the artist is from

Bruised Peaches & Sugar Secrets (unedited) – series of documentary poetry that uses the landscape, artifacts, and community as witness to the artist’s matriarchal narratives in an attempt to understand her inheritances of trauma, abuse, and silence

Links to experimental works:

A Black Daughter’s Inheritance https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zz9b_SlJqbw

Mapping the Territory <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAi6wLi8HsQ&t=2s>

Grooving Visual Experiments <https://youtu.be/GfG53ymK5xI>

Annihilation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXZkm4SzegQ&t=4s>

Interview Visuals: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTOp-Kb25o8/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCCwe5jVdWs/> / [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4R-](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4R-9NVZXiQ)

[9NVZXiQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4R-9NVZXiQ)

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